Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JONATHAN EDWARDS

Jonathan Edwards, one of the most renowned and influential American pastors and theologians, was born in 1703 in Connecticut. At the age of thirteen, Edwards enrolled at Yale, where he nurtured interests in philosophy, science, and theology. In college, Edwards experienced a religious awakening that would change the course of his life. In 1727, after several years of preaching intermittently around the northeastern United States, Edwards became the minister of a congregation in Northampton, Massachusetts. That year, he also married Sarah Pierpont, a woman whose devotion to God had long inspired him. In the 1730s, as the Protestant revivals that would become known as the First Great Awakening were building steam in New England, Edwards gained a reputation as one of the most powerful and effective pastors in New England. This led him to be called to the unruly congregation in Enfield, Connecticut, where he preached "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" in 1741. Edwards' theology was controversial, and his radical beliefs on salvation and grace eventually got him fired from Northampton. After this, he presided over a Native American congregation in Stockbridge, Massachusetts and began to write prolifically, producing many books on theology. In 1758, Edwards became president of the College of New Jersey (now Princeton), but he died of smallpox almost immediately. He and Sarah had eleven children, many of whom went on to prolific careers in public life.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is the canonical text of the Great Awakening (sometimes known as the First Great Awakening). The Great Awakening was a Protestant religious revival, lasting from roughly 1730-1755, that dispensed with religious ceremony and tradition in order to emphasize the importance of a personal connection to religion and the need for Christ's salvation. This new religious fervor breathed life into American Protestantism, particularly in New England, where many Christians had grown more materially comfortable in tandem with their Churches becoming more academic and less spiritual, and the ideas of the Enlightenment spreading and eroding their faith. The impact of the Great Awakening on American life was tremendous and difficult to quantify. However, undoubtedly this movement increased religious fervor, as well as religious diversity, in the United States (directly influencing the adoption of the First Amendment to the Constitution). Some historians even argue that the Great Awakening helped inspire the American Revolution, since its ideas encouraged individuals to question authority, and its tactics—pamphleteering, rallies, and fiery rhetoric—would usher in the Revolution several decades later.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

"Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is doubtless the most famous sermon ever preached on American soil, but Edwards gave other famous sermons that reflected his fiery theology, including "The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners" and "The Manner in Which the Salvation of the Soul is to be Sought." Edwards also wrote books on theology, the most famous of which are *Religious Affectations* and *Freedom of the Will*. Other well-known New England ministers from the Colonial period include Cotton Mather, George Whitefield, and John Cotton, who all gave sermons that reverberated through American religious life. Jonathan Edwards was interested in science and Enlightenment philosophy—he loved Isaac Newton and John Locke—and his writing is deeply influenced by Puritan theology. Many early American writers grappled, as Edwards did, with the legacy and ideas of Puritanism; Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Young Goodman Brown*, for example, shares with "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" the theme of damnation lurking behind ordinary life in New England. In addition, the African American poet Phyllis Wheatley—who was converted in a religious revival much like those Edwards led—wrote passionately of her experiences of 18th century New England Christianity. Edwards' influence on literature is still felt today. Susan Howe, the contemporary American poet, writes often of Edwards, most recently in her poetry collection *That This*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God
- **When Written:** 1741
- **Where Written:** Northampton, Massachusetts
- **When Published:** Delivered on July 8, 1741 to a congregation in Enfield, Connecticut
- **Literary Period:** Great Awakening
- **Genre:** Sermon
- **Climax:** When Edwards has thoroughly described God's wrath and then offers sinners the chance to be saved through Christ
- **Antagonist:** Sin, God's wrath, Hell

EXTRA CREDIT

Writing on the Run. Edwards would often compose sermons in his head while riding on horseback from town to town. Since he couldn't write while riding, he would associate a thought with

an area of his clothing and pin a piece of paper there to remind him. At the end of a journey, his clothes would sometimes be covered in paper.

Distinguished Descendants. The descendants of Jonathan Edwards and his wife, Sarah Pierpont Edwards, are notoriously distinguished. The couple is related to, among others, Vice President Aaron Burr, First Lady Edith Roosevelt, writers O. Henry and Robert Lowell, and several U.S. Senators, college presidents, governors, and judges.

PLOT SUMMARY

In accordance with traditional sermon structure, Jonathan Edwards opens "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" with the two Biblical readings on which the sermon is based. One passage, from the Book of Amos, is about God's ability to find sinners and take them to hell no matter where they are. The other, from Deuteronomy, simply says, "Their foot shall slide in due time."

Edwards begins the body of his sermon by contextualizing these quotations. Even though God was kind to the Israelites, they betrayed him, and therefore God brought vengeance upon them. The quote from Deuteronomy is God's threat of vengeance, and Edwards proceeds to analyze the implications of this quote in depth. First, he notes that the quote implies that the Israelites always risked "destruction" (damnation), just as someone walking on a slippery surface is always in danger of falling. Second, he notes that a fall on a slippery surface is always sudden and unexpected—destruction might come to sinners at any time. Third, Edwards clarifies that when a person falls on a slippery surface, the fall is due only to their own weight (or, metaphorically, their sin)—they do not need to be pushed. Fourth, Edwards changes the metaphor from a person on a slippery surface to a person held by the hand of God on a slippery slope with a pit at the bottom. This metaphor shows that it's God's hand alone that keeps a sinner from hell, and when God lets go, the weight of their sins will drag them inevitably into hell.

From his close reading of the Deuteronomy quote, Edwards comes to one central conclusion: "There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the meer pleasure of God." Edwards then proceeds to meditate on this conclusion with a list of ten observations.

1. Mankind cannot interfere with God's power to cast them into hell whenever he pleases. While powerful men on earth, like princes, might have trouble subduing a rebellion, God has no such difficulty casting sinners into hell. Even if sinners band together against God, they are like "large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames."

2. Since sinners deserve to go to hell, "divine justice" is no reason for God to stay his hand. In fact, the congregation should understand "justice" to mean God sending them to their rightful place in hell.

3. Every "unconverted" sinner (those who have not come to Christ) is condemned to hell. Such sinners actually originally *come* from hell, which means that hell is, in every way, their rightful place.

4. Sinners shouldn't take their continued presence on earth as evidence that God is less angry with them than he is with people already in hell. In fact, God is *angrier* with many people on earth—and, indeed, with many people in this congregation—than he is with people in hell.

5. The Devil—who stalks sinners like a hungry lion—is ready to seize his prey and bring them to hell whenever God wills it. In fact, sinners already belong to the Devil; scripture says he has their souls in his possession.

6. The souls of sinners contain the very "seeds of hell fire." In other words, within sinful souls lie the conditions of hell itself, and the only thing keeping these souls from bursting into flame is God's arbitrary will.

7. The congregation should not take false comfort from finding "no visible means of death at hand." Sinners walk on a rotten floor over the pit of hell and the floor could collapse unexpectedly at any moment. Indeed, God has many ways of killing a person in the course of an ordinary day.

8. Even if a sinner goes to great pains to protect his or her life, this is no safeguard against the will of God. Wisdom, too, is useless, since wise people die unexpectedly just as often as fools.

9. Every person who hears of hell flatters themselves by believing that they will escape its torments through their cleverness or righteousness. However, most of those who are now in hell (which is most people who die) also believed this, so a sense of security should not be a comfort.

10. God has no obligation to keep anyone from hell. Instead, it is Christ who promised salvation and eternal life through the covenant of grace. Therefore, no matter how earnestly a sinner prays or worships, if he or she does not believe in Christ, then he or she will not be saved. So, sinners who don't believe in Christ exist at the whim of a God who loathes them, and they have absolutely no security or means for obtaining salvation.

The following section of Edwards' sermon, the "Application," applies the lessons from Edwards' readings of the Bible to the congregation's lives. Edwards states outright that his purpose in giving the sermon is to bring the congregation to Christ. He then evokes God's wrath through a series of frightening metaphors and descriptions. Edwards says that sins make people "heavy as lead" and without God's hand they would descend straight into hell. He notes that God is the only force keeping the earth from spitting sinners out, since God's

creatures are meant to serve God, and sin is abhorrent to the natural order of the world—the sun does not "willingly" shine on sinners, nor does the air want to keep sinners alive. Edwards compares the wrath of God to dammed waters. Just as the pressure builds behind a dam, God's wrath accumulates over a lifetime of sin. Once God withdraws his hand, the force of his wrath floods sinners into hell. Everyone in the congregation is subject to this—even those who have made earnest moral reforms and who keep strict religious practice—unless they have been born again into Christ. Indeed, many who have wound up in hell were surprised to find themselves there because they thought they had lived righteously.

Edwards compares God holding sinners over the pit of hell to a person holding a "spider, or some loathsome insect" over a fire. God "abhors" sinners, and the sinners have "dreadfully provoked" him. He loathes sinners ten thousand times as much as a person hates a venomous serpent, and there is no reason except God's arbitrary will that the sinners in the congregation did not wake up this morning in hell, which is where they belong. To emphasize this danger, Edwards begins another numbered list of observations about God's wrath.

1. The wrath of God is not like the wrath of people because God's power is infinite. People fear the power of kings, but the most horrible tortures and punishments imposed by a king are nothing compared to the wrath of the infinite God.

2. God's wrath is fierce. The Bible often explains God's fierceness and fury, but even the most dreadful words are inadequate to communicating the truth of God's wrath. Words also cannot communicate the "dreadful, inexpressible, inconceivable depth of misery" in which sinners find themselves in hell. Despite this, God will have no mercy on a sinner's suffering, no matter how unbearable. The congregation could avoid this by coming to Christ today, but otherwise God will "laugh and mock" in response to the congregation's cries and trample them until his clothes are stained with their blood.

3. Sometimes God needs to show his power and wrath, so he makes an example of sinners by torturing them for "the whole universe to behold." Thus, if the congregation remains "in an unconverted state," this could happen to them—they could suffer unimaginably while angels, Christ, and the "glorious inhabitants of heaven" look on.

4. God's wrath is everlasting: there is no end to suffering in hell. Edwards urges the congregation to try to imagine being in hell—enduring torture that is, even for one moment, unendurable—and having to look forward to an eternity of this. This reality is inexpressible, Edwards admits, and his words can only give a "feeble, faint representation" of God's anger.

However, many people in the congregation will have this very experience, and yet some of those people are doubtless flattering themselves that they will escape it because of their righteousness, even without accepting Christ. The congregation has an opportunity right now to avoid this terrible fate and obtain salvation, an opportunity that those in hell would giving anything to have. Christ is calling to sinners, and they are flocking to him, finding themselves "in a happy state" after he washes their sins with his blood. Edwards asks the congregation to imagine being sent to hell while others are rejoicing. Therefore, the hard-hearted congregants must "wake thoroughly out of sleep" and accept Christ. Edwards claims that God seems to be quickly gathering up his "elect" (those bound for heaven), and therefore most of those who will ever be saved will likely be saved very soon. Today is the congregation's best chance to be saved—if they pass Christ over now, their hearts will continue to harden and it will be even more difficult to accept Christ in the future. If the congregation doesn't get saved today, then they will regret it—they will even regret the day they were born. Therefore, today is the day to escape from damnation, "lest you be consumed."

CHARACTERS

Jonathan Edwards – Jonathan Edwards, an eighteenth-century preacher and theologian, is the author of the sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." He is, therefore, the narrator of the text, and his purpose in delivering the sermon is to convince a Connecticut congregation (one notoriously immune to the theology of the Great Awakening) to find salvation by accepting Christ. Edwards is notable for his harsh vision of Christianity, in which hell is a real place, God is righteously furious with mankind and cruelly unmerciful towards them, and Christ's love is the only hope for salvation. Edwards is known for his deep engagement with theology, and for his evocative use of the English language—indeed, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is known as a rhetorical masterpiece, one that successfully brought much of the unruly congregation to reckon with their faith.

God – To Edwards, God's primary characteristics are his power and his wrath. Edwards sees God as the most powerful force in the universe, beside whom even the most powerful human beings are "but feeble despicable worms in the dust." God's power is limitless and unpredictable, as sinners could be cast into hell at any time. Edwards also goes to great pains to stress the wrath of God. God's wrath comes from mankind's fall; since God created people to be good, he is angry that original sin ruined mankind, and he is eager to punish them for their sinful natures. Edwards stresses that God loathes mankind with an untampered wrath—"You are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes," Edwards says, "as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours." Edwards also points out that God is vindictive and cruel, stressing that sinners who cannot bear the pains of hell should expect no mercy or restraint, no matter how unbearable they find their eternal torment. Futhermore, God will show no pity on sinners but will rather "laugh and

mock" when they cry, and might even make their torture a spectacle for "the whole universe," including all the "inhabitants of heaven," in order to prove his limitless power and profound indignation with mankind. Unlike Christ, God has no obligation to save mankind from hell, and no tendency towards mercy. God is simply vengeful, exacting justice on the depraved.

Christ ("the Mediator") – While Edwards believed that God was angry and vindictive and had no responsibility (or propensity) to provide mercy and salvation, he believed that Christ was mankind's only hope. This is due to the covenant of grace, which is the interpretation of the Bible that eternal life is promised to those who have faith in Christ. Edwards refers to Christ as "the Mediator," because it is Christ who mediates between God and mankind, intervening against God's wrath to save from damnation those who have faith in Christ and who ask him for mercy. Therefore, Christ is the only redeeming figure in Edwards' frightening sermon; in fact, the sermon is so frightening because Edwards is using all the rhetoric at his disposal to convince the congregation that they must have faith in Christ, or else they will suffer unimaginable consequences.

The Congregation –The congregants of a church in Enfield, Connecticut are the audience of Edwards' sermon. While the ideas of the Great Awakening—a Protestant revival that emphasized individual religious experience and the necessity of salvation through Christ—were sweeping New England in the 1740s, this congregation had been stubbornly immune to accepting the new religious fervor, and Edwards was enlisted to convert them. Edwards repeatedly insists that, while the congregants might be arrogantly confident in their religious faith and their ultimate ascension to heaven, many of them would be unpleasantly surprised to find themselves in hell due to their improper beliefs and practices. As such, Edwards implores them to change their ways before it's too late. The members of the congregation were reportedly terrified by Edwards' sermon, interrupting him constantly to ask what they might do to avoid the horrible fate he described. When Edwards says "you" in the sermon, he is referring to the congregation.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

POWER AND PRECARIOUSNESS

Jonathan Edwards returns over and over to the notion that, while human beings might think that they have power over their own lives, their position on Earth (and beyond) is precarious because they are in the hands of a God whose will is arbitrary and all-powerful. In other words, for people to consider themselves to be safe from death or damnation based on their health, strength, intelligence, goodness, or pragmatism is, to Edwards, pure vanity and self-delusion.

Edwards uses various metaphors throughout the sermon to illustrate the precariousness of the human condition and the power of God. The first is the metaphor of the person walking on a slippery surface. Edwards remarks that this person is vulnerable to falling (damnation, metaphorically speaking), that the fall will be sudden and unexpected, and that the fall will be due to their own weight, rather than any external force. He then shifts the metaphor to emphasize God's role: the person is not walking on a slippery surface, but is rather held by God on a slippery slope above a pit. Once God lets go, the person will fall—still due to his or her own weight—into damnation, and the person is powerless to resist. Some of Edwards' most evocative metaphors of precariousness include: sinners walk on a rotted floor above the pit of hell, sinners "hang by a slender thread" over flames that threaten to singe and break that thread, and sinners could be crushed by God as easily as one crushes a worm underfoot.

Edwards also goes to great lengths to explain just how powerful God is. He discusses the powerlessness of the individual before God, and the futility of even "vast multitudes of God's enemies" banding together to resist God. Though humans tend to fear the power of rulers, particularly "absolute monarchs" whose subjects are "wholly in their power," Edwards notes that, "the greatest earthly potentates, in their greatest majesty and strength, and when clothed in their greatest terrors, are but feeble despicable worms of the dust, in comparison of the great and almighty Creator and King of Heaven and Earth." God is even more powerful than spiritual forces, too: "if your strength were ten thousand times greater than it is, yea, ten thousand times greater than the stoutest, sturdiest Devil in Hell," you would still not be able to overpower God's will or endure his fury. Indeed, there is "no fortress that is any defence from the power of God."

This relentless emphasis of the precariousness of man and the power of God can be seen as Edwards' reaction to historical circumstances. Edwards gave this sermon during a time in which New Englanders were becoming used to new affluence and security, and were thus beginning to feel that they had more control over their own lives and destinies. He was also preaching to a congregation that was reputed to be particularly difficult to move. In order to bring these parishioners into line, Edwards must have felt that he needed to undercut the congregation's new sense of power and security; he would have seen these feelings as dangerous vanities that were preventing them from coming to Christ. The only way for the congregation to achieve salvation, according to Edwards, was through a

genuine commitment to Christ, and in order for them to have the proper relationship with Christ, they would have to first understand their own powerlessness to affect their circumstances without him, and the danger they were in because of the wrath and power of God.

WRATH, MERCY, AND GRACE

Throughout the sermon, Edwards emphasizes that God loathes all human beings because they are not worthy of him, he's angry with them for failing him, and he owes them no mercy. This attitude can be summed up by the notion that God's primary characteristic is his wrath. Edwards expresses this colorfully in several instances, including this famous one: "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours."

Not only is God full of wrath, but he is also vindictive: were a sinner to cry for his pity, Edwards insists that God would merely "laugh and mock." Edwards also claims that God, in order to demonstrate his wrath and power, would torture sinners in front of "all the inhabitants of heaven," making their misery at the hands of his unbearable punishments a spectacle for all. Furthermore, though Edwards notes that it is God's hand that keeps sinners from damnation during every moment they are on earth, this should not be interpreted as an indication that God approves of the behavior of the wicked or that he hates them any less than he hates those already in hell. God's will is arbitrary and omnipotent, and all sinners will go to hell when the appointed time arrives—to keep them on earth is not a show of mercy or compassion. Edwards emphasizes the unrelenting cruelty and anger of God in order to show the congregation the danger that they are in if they do not give themselves over to Christ. Without Christ, "the fiery floods of the fierceness and wrath of God would rush forth with inconceivable fury, and would come upon you with omnipotent power."

The extreme and brutal descriptions of God's wrath, then, can be seen as a device that Edwards uses to underscore the benevolence and necessity of Christ and his covenant of grace. While God has no obligation or inclination towards mercy or grace, Christ died so that humans might be saved, and it is Christ's promises that remain the only hope for anyone wishing to escape damnation. In fact, Edwards often refers to Christ as "the Mediator," because it is Christ alone who can alter, or "mediate," a person's sour relationship with God.

Despite the terror and brutality of Edwards' descriptions of God, it is through his evocations of Christ's love that he provides optimism. Of those who have converted to Christ, Edwards writes: "many that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in an happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him that has loved them and washed them from their sins in his own blood, and rejoicing in hope of the glory of God." Thus, the human relationship with the divine (in Edwards' harsh worldview) is one in which humans are always loathsome in the eyes of God, but they are only subject to his wrath if they do not, through their faith, enlist Christ to intervene with his grace.

LANGUAGE AND METAPHOR

Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God is a sermon: it's a message about God delivered through the spoken word. As sermons and the Bible (a written text, whose words are "the words of the great God") are the primary modes by which a person can understand and relate to God, language should be understood as having a special role in religion and faith. In this instance, in order for language to do its job of propelling the congregation towards Christ, Edwards places extra emphasis on the power and limits of language and metaphor. He uses extreme and evocative metaphors to try to help the congregation understand religious ideas, such as their own precariousness and the wrath of God, but he also acknowledges that these metaphors can only say so much: he occasionally gestures towards the things that language cannot express.

The great variety and creativity of Edwards' metaphors is one of the most notable aspects of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Were Edwards simply to say that "God is full of wrath," the congregation would understand what he meant, but the statement would likely remain fairly abstract. By comparing God's wrath to familiar situations on Earth, however, the congregation is able to feel the force and meaning of the phrase "God is full of wrath" more viscerally. For example, when Edwards tries to communicate how powerless sinners are, he doesn't simply state that they are weak compared to God; instead, he says that God's enemies are "as great heaps of light chaff [cornhusks] before the whirlwind; or large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames." By using these images of a powerful wind carrying cornhusks or of kindling thrown into a raging fire, Edwards gives the congregation a concrete way to understand the magnitude (and violence) of God's power compared to theirs. Metaphor, in other words, helps Edwards to make spiritual principles personal to the congregation, thereby communicating the necessity of finding Christ.

However, not wanting the congregation to get the wrong idea, Edwards is also careful to underscore that, though his metaphors give a sense of abstract spiritual ideas, they cannot adequately communicate the truth of those ideas. In fact, Edwards suggests that despite his best efforts to be brutal and extreme, his metaphors paint a *rosier* spiritual picture than his congregation should expect. This is most apparent in the section in which Edwards attempts to describe the abject

horror that awaits sinners during an eternity of torture in hell. Edwards makes such threats as, "you will absolutely despair of ever having any deliverance, any end, any mitigation, any rest at all; you will know certainly that you must wear out long ages, millions of millions of ages, in wrestling and conflicting with this almighty merciless vengeance," but he then goes on to remind the congregation that, "Oh who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; 'tis inexpressible and inconceivable: for who knows the power of God's anger?" Edwards makes a similar statement about his attempts to explain the fierceness of the wrath of God: "Who can utter or conceive what such expressions carry in them! But it is not only said so, but the fierceness and wrath of almighty God." In other words, despite the fact that Edwards' words are inadequate to communicate reality, they are not just words: they stand for something real, which is the unimaginable wrath of God.

Thus, for Edwards, language is the primary tool through which sinners can be brought to Christ and saved, and this is unfortunate, since language cannot approach the truth of God. Edwards does his best to use the power, variety, and limits of language to communicate his message. He quotes often from the Bible (God's own words), he uses florid and brutal metaphors to personalize abstract concepts, and, in case that wasn't enough, he reminds the congregation that his metaphors are underwhelming in comparison to the inexpressible truth. It's worth noting that this combination of linguistic tactics was persuasive: members of the congregation were reported to have wept and moaned and even fainted, with some crying out to Edwards asking what they needed to do to be saved.

THEOLOGY AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

Edwards' theology is based on several intricate beliefs about the human condition, beliefs he has gleaned directly from the Bible. Human nature, he believes, is good in its purest form, but has been tainted by original sin (passed down from Adam and Eve), which has infected people with evil. Because of original sin and the evil into which it leads people, human goodness and salvation depend on a person's ability to become born again into Christ's love. In short, Edwards believes that humans are meant to be good, but have been born evil (due to original sin) and can only be saved by accepting Christ. Without understanding the interplay of these beliefs, Edwards' statements may seem contradictory, as he wobbles between declarations of the goodness of man and statements that all men are evil and doomed to hell because of it.

Edwards' clearest indication that human beings aren't meant to be evil comes when he tells the congregation that, if they are sinners, then they are a burden to the earth. God's creatures are meant to serve God, he says, and the earth's resources—the sun, the air, and the land, which are also made by God to serve God—do not "willingly" keep sinners alive. In fact, if not for the hand of God, Edwards tells the congregation, the earth "would spew you out." This is a complicated statement, because Edwards is implying that all people are sinners, but that being a sinner is an unnatural state for mankind, as sinning is fundamentally opposed to the natural order of the world—so much so that the earth wants to reject a sinner's very presence. As God's creatures, though, Edwards makes clear here that, were the world in harmony, every human being would be good rather than evil.

Yet even as Edwards insists that a person's most natural state is goodness, he also relentlessly and intricately describes the evil that is common to all people. Sometimes these descriptions go so far as to imply that mankind is naturally depraved, which seems—superficially—to be at odds with Edwards' insistence that mankind is naturally good. Edwards' description of mankind's inevitable depravity is particularly notable when he discusses how "the very nature of carnal men" contains "the foundation for the torments of hell," and that a person's soul—the center of their spiritual being—has the "seeds of hell fire." This would seem to be a definitive indication that mankind is naturally depraved, but it's important to make the distinction between the depravity that Edwards sees as inevitably afflicting all people due to original sin, and the goodness that is the condition for which a person's being is naturally meant. In other words, all of mankind is God's creation, and therefore mankind is naturally good, but mankind also shares the stain of original sin, which means that—despite their natural goodness—they all have an innate propensity for evil that only Christ's love and mercy can overcome.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in blue text throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

SLIPPERY SURFACE

Jonathan Edwards opens "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" with two Biblical quotes, including one from Deuteronomy, "Their foot shall slide in due time." From this quote, which is the foundation of the sermon, Edwards draws a metaphor: a sinner's precarious spiritual condition is a foot on a slippery surface. The metaphor proves fertile for Edwards, as he elaborates on it to illustrate several of his central points about religion. Just as a person on a slippery surface may fall unexpectedly at any moment, a sinner might be sent at any moment to hell, and a person who slips will fall due to their own weight—not because they were pushed—just as a

sinner falls due only to the weight of their sin. Finally, Edwards alters his metaphor slightly, asking the congregation to envision themselves held by the hand of God on a slippery slope that descends into the pit of hell. If God released his hand, the sinner would slip and fall by their own weight into hell and would have no way of stopping the slide. Thus, Edwards uses the slippery surface to represent the precariousness, powerlessness, and risk of living a life of sin. By scaring sinners into recognizing how close they are to falling into hell, Edwards hopes to drive them to obtain salvation by accepting Christ—Christ being the only safeguard against a sinner's inevitable slip.

VERMIN

Throughout his sermon, Edwards uses evocative imagery of vermin (creatures considered to be despicable) to show sinners the magnitude of God's hatred for them. In other words, Edwards asks the sinners to consider their own hatred of vermin—and the ease with which they kill vermin—while explaining that they themselves are vermin to God. Edwards uses this metaphor to stress two points: the limitless power of God, and God's wrath. For example, Edwards uses imagery of stomping on worms, which are notably weak and helpless creatures, to show God's power. "We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth," he writes, "…thus easy is it for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell." In another passage, after explaining that people fear the wrath of kings, Edwards reminds the congregation that "the greatest earthly potentates, in their greatest majesty and strength, and when clothed in their greatest terrors, are but feeble despicable worms of the dust, in comparison of the great and almighty Creator and King of Heaven and Earth." Furthermore, Edwards uses vermin to illustrate that not only does God have limitless power, but he also has boundless hate: "The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked." Soon after, Edwards clarifies his point by writing that, "you are ten thousand times so abominable in [God's] eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours." Therefore, Edwards' imagery of vermin is meant to represent sinners, threatening the congregation by drawing their attention to their helplessness to alter the will of God, as well as reminding them that God hates them and can cast them into hell with as much ease as they themselves might kill an insect they despise.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God: And Other Puritan Sermons* published in 2013.

Part 1 Quotes

❝ There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the meer pleasure of God.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

After elaborating on the implications of the quote from Deuteronomy that begins the sermon ("Their foot shall slide in due time"), Edwards summarizes his thoughts on the quote's meaning with the statement above. This is meant to be a threat to the congregation. Any sense of security that the parishioners have in their lives is a false one, because God has absolute power over their lives, and he can sentence them to hell in an instant without warning. Furthermore, as Edwards will go on to demonstrate, this situation is uniquely perilous to the congregation because God despises them and is full of wrath. Therefore, their existence depends on God's will alone, which is arbitrary—they can't influence it one way or another—and vengeful. Their lives, then, are powerless and precarious, lived according to the whims of an infinitely powerful and angry God.

❝ Sometimes an earthly prince meets with a great deal of difficulty to subdue a rebel, that has found means to fortify himself, and has made himself strong by the numbers of his followers. But it is not so with God. There is no fortress that is any defence from the power of God. Tho' hand join in hand, and vast multitudes of God's enemies combine and associate themselves, they are easily broken in pieces: They are as great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind; or large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames. We find it easy to tread on and crush a worm that we see crawling on the earth; so 'tis easy for us to cut or singe a slender thread that any thing hangs by; thus easy it is for God when he pleases to cast his enemies down to hell.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 172

Explanation and Analysis

Edwards wants to convince the congregation of the infinite power of God, but it's a relatively abstract concept, one that the parishioners might not be able to grasp (or fully appreciate) through Edwards simply stating what he believes. In order to drive his point home, then, Edwards turns to concrete metaphors that the congregation will recognize from their own lives. Therefore, Edwards states that God has more power than princes, despite how much power princes have on earth, and he even claims that a great many sinners all banded together can be devoured by God's wrath just as a fire devours kindling—human beings, he implies, are insignificant and easy to destroy. Though Edwards is not yet specifically talking about God's hatred, he alludes to it by referencing God's enemies "broken in pieces" and a worm being easily crushed underfoot. This series of metaphors overtly demonstrates the supreme power of God, but it also implies that God's power is intertwined with violence and a hatred for the sinners he consumes. Never does Edwards include a metaphor of God's power being used for anything but destruction, which is consistent with Edwards' idea that God's main characteristic is his wrath.

Joh. 3:18. *He that believeth not is condemned already.* So that every unconverted man properly belongs to hell; that is his place; from thence he is Joh. 8:23. *Ye are from beneath.* And thither he is bound; 'tis the place that justice, and God's word, and the sentence of his unchangeable law assigns him.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

This passage suggests that sinners are not only condemned to hell, but they also actually *come* from hell, which makes them doubly belong there. This is a complicated passage to square with Edwards' overall theology. He seems to suggest that sinners who do not believe in Christ are, by nature, evil (since they come from hell), whereas those who are redeemed would presumably come from somewhere else. This binary view of salvation is much more aligned with Edwards' Calvinist influences (in which God elects those who are saved based on his will alone) than with his evangelism (in which people can be saved by finding Christ).

The very purpose of Edwards' sermon is to save sinners by convincing them to give themselves to Christ. This implies that sinners can *become* saved, which presumably means that their salvation is not part of their nature, but rather based (at least in part) on their behavior and beliefs. Perhaps, then, this passage is more a rhetorical flourish than a solid theological argument, meant more to scare the congregation than to paint a nuanced picture of their spiritual reality.

Yea God is a great deal more angry with great numbers that are now on earth, yea doubtless, with many that are now in this congregation, that it may be are at ease and quiet, than he is with many of those that are now in the flames of hell.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God, The Congregation

Related Themes:

Page Number: 173

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Edwards explains to the congregation that they would be wrong to think that they are not currently on earth (instead of in hell) because God is less angry with them than he is with those in hell. On the contrary, the congregants remain on earth because of God's arbitrary will, and God is potentially even angrier with them than he is with those already condemned to eternal torture. This is an explicit attempt to unsettle the congregation by attacking their assumptions; lest they feel safer for not having been struck down yet, Edwards tells them that their sense of safety is based on faulty logic. By breaking down all the objections that the congregation is likely to have to Edwards' call to Christ, Edwards primes the congregants to receive his message.

There is laid in the very nature of carnal men, a foundation for the torments of hell: There are those corrupt principles, in reigning power in them, and in full possession of them, that are seeds of hell fire. These principles are active and powerful, exceeding violent in their nature, and if it were not for the restraining hand of God upon them, they would soon break out, they would flame out after the same manner as the same corruptions, the same enmity does in the hearts of damned souls, and would beget the same torments in 'em as they do in them.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

Though Edwards believes that mankind is naturally good (in the sense that God created them to be good), he also believes that all men have been tainted by original sin, such that they contain evil within themselves. Thus, man's primary nature is good, but—due to original sin—all men also share a propensity towards evil. Here, Edwards suggests that the evil of original sin is equivalent to men containing in their souls the materials of hell. In other words, a person's soul provides the conditions for igniting hellfire, and the only force keeping a person from literally becoming hell is God's hand. This recalls Edwards' slippery slope metaphor, in which a sinner is held by God above a slippery slope descending into a pit, and thus God's hand is the only thing keeping a sinner from their inevitable descent into hell. This passage essentially says the same thing as the slippery slope metaphor, just through slightly different imagery, and with the added implication that sinners are not only bound for hell, but they themselves could also *become* hell, since they carry hell within their souls.

> Unconverted men walk over the pit of hell on a rotten covering, and there are innumerable places in this covering so weak that they won't bear their weight, and these places are not seen. The arrows of death fly unseen at noon-day; the sharpest sight can't discern them. God has so many different unsearchable ways of taking wicked men out of the world and sending 'em to hell, that there is nothing to make it appear that God had need to be at the expence of a miracle, or go out of the ordinary course of his providence, to destroy any wicked man, at any moment.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 174

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Edwards attempts once again to anticipate an objection that the audience might have to his sermon and then refute that objection. In this case, the objection is that the urgency of Edwards' message is disproportionate, since "there are no visible means of death at hand" (i.e. the congregants are in good health, or aren't in physical danger, so they can expect to live a long time and therefore they do not need to accept Christ immediately). Edwards uses evocative metaphors in this passage to unsettle the congregation, noting that God doesn't have to appear to perform a miracle to send a sinner to hell without warning—people die unexpectedly all the time. Therefore, sinners are *always* in danger of going to hell, and any sense of security or longevity that they might have is misguided.

> But the foolish children of men miserably delude themselves in their own schemes, and in their confidence in their own strength and wisdom; they trust to nothing but a shadow.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God, The Congregation

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

Edwards has just explained that, while they were alive, the sinners now in hell believed that they would go to heaven. They made plans for their own salvation and behaved as they thought they should, but they did not take the required step of accepting Christ, and therefore they were condemned. This is meant as a threat to those in the congregation who might share the arrogance of these sinners. Lest anyone listening believes that they don't need to follow Edwards' directions because they have their own plans for salvation, Edwards undercuts their security by telling them that their plans are delusional and will simply land them in hell. Furthermore, he suggests that their faith is false without Christ, since they "trust to nothing but a shadow." This passage is a further attempt to reign in the congregation by dismantling all of their possible objections to the sermon, thereby opening them up to Edwards' message.

> God has laid himself under no obligation, by any promise to keep any natural man out of hell one moment. God certainly has made no promises either of eternal life, or of any deliverance or preservation from eternal death, but what are contained in the covenant of grace, the promises that are given in Christ, in whom all the promises are Yea and Amen.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God, Christ ("the Mediator")

Related Themes:

Page Number: 175-176

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains Edwards' insistence on using a speech about salvation to portray God as vengeful, furious, and cruel. In Edwards' view, God is irrelevant to salvation—he has no love for mankind nor any obligations to show them mercy. In fact, God's obligation is only to condemn sinners to hell, and, therefore, a sinner's only hope of avoiding God's condemnation is to seek salvation through Christ's covenant of grace. However, the members of the congregation believe that they can obtain salvation by simply loving and obeying God, rather than by placing their faith in Christ. Therefore, Edwards spends his sermon communicating, in the most dire terms, the magnitude of God's wrath and cruelty, which is meant to drive the congregation into focusing on Christ and to give them a sense of the consequences they will face if they continue in their ways.

Part 2. Application Quotes

❝ Were it not that so is the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun don't willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth don't willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air don't willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies. God's creatures are good, and were made for men to serve God with, and don't willingly subserve to any other purpose, and groan when they are abused to purposes so directly contrary to their nature and end.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 175

Explanation and Analysis

This is perhaps the only indication in the sermon that Edwards—who has consistently disparaged mankind for its propensity to sin—believes that human beings are naturally good. While this passage is far from optimistic (it's stating that humans are a burden on the earth and would be cast out from its resources if not for God), the implication of the passage is that, in the natural order of things, human beings would live in harmony with all of God's creation by serving God rather than Satan. Thus, the natural state of mankind is good, but human beings are not living according to their nature, since they have been corrupted by original sin. So, while not explicitly hopeful, this passage does nod to an innate potential for goodness in people, which is optimistic by the standards of the sermon. It's also worth noting that, by telling people they are a burden to the earth and a menace to its resources, Edwards is once again (but this time subtly) comparing sinners to vermin.

❝ The God that holds you over the pit of Hell, much as one holds a spider, or some loathsome insect, over the fire, abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked; his wrath towards you burns like fire; he looks upon you as worthy of nothing else, but to be cast into the fire; he is of purer eyes than to bear to have you in his sight; you are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God, The Congregation

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 178

Explanation and Analysis

This is perhaps the most famous quotation from the sermon, and the imagery alludes to the sermon's title, since Edwards is describing an enraged God holding sinners over the flames. Edwards is using all the fury at his disposal here to communicate to the congregation just how much God hates them, and just how precarious their position is. His imagery of vermin escalates, as he references a spider, an insect, and a serpent in quick succession. Not only are these vermin "loathsome" (and therefore fit for the fire), but the God that holds them is also "dreadfully provoked," which implies that the vermin are *actively* offending him with their behavior, rather than just passively bothering them with their hateful existence. This reminds the sinners that they

are not only bad in their essence, but that their sins are also enraging God and making him more likely to throw them into the fire at any moment. Edwards, in other words, is portraying God as being so enraged and provoked that he is liable to act at any moment, which emphasizes the precarious position that the sinners' souls are in.

> That God will execute the fierceness of his anger, implies that he will inflict wrath without any pity: when God beholds the ineffable extremity of your case, and sees your torment to be so vastly disproportion'd to your strength, and sees how your poor soul is crushed and sinks down, as it were into an infinite gloom, he will have no compassion upon you, he will not forbear the executions of his wrath, or in the least lighten his hand; there shall be no moderation or mercy, nor will God then at all stay his rough wind; he will have no regard to your welfare, nor be at all careful lest you should suffer too much, in any other sense than only that you shall not suffer beyond what strict justice requires: nothing shall be with held, because it's so hard for you to bear.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God, The Congregation

Related Themes:

Page Number: 180

Explanation and Analysis

Edwards explores God's wrath further, noting that it's God's duty to serve justice by torturing sinners in an excruciating manner in hell. Therefore, if the congregation thinks that God might pity them or show restraint or have compassion for their suffering, they are deluding themselves. Throughout the sermon, Edwards has characterized God as furious, vengeful, and even cruel (recall God's desire to prove his power by torturing a sinner in front of the whole universe). Here, however, Edwards tries to frame God's excruciating torture as something other than cruelty: to Edwards, God is simply duty bound to make sinners suffer, and he won't show restraint on their behalf, but he will show restraint in that he won't torture them "beyond what strict justice requires." Edwards slips this caveat into a furious passage as a way to counterbalance his descriptions of God as a cruel figure, but he doesn't emphasize it much because it's somewhat contrary to his goal of terrifying the congregation into accepting Christ—Christ being the figure who will show the mercy, compassion, and restraint that God can't.

> Oh who can express what the state of a soul in such circumstances is! All that we can possibly say about it, gives but a very feeble, faint representation of it; 'tis inexpressible and inconceivable: for who knows the power of God's anger?

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 182

Explanation and Analysis

As a preacher, Edwards must use language to communicate spiritual truths to the audience. Edwards is a master of the English language—he is adept at interpreting the Bible, structuring a forceful argument, and deploying such evocative imagery that his sermons are still read three hundred years later. However, Edwards worries that this is not enough, since God is infinitely powerful and the human mind (let alone the English language) cannot fathom infinity. Therefore, though Edwards has used the most extreme comparisons throughout his sermon to illustrate the power and wrath of God, he also tells the congregation that the fury of his language is "but a very feeble, faint representation" of the reality it seeks to communicate. This is an attempt to underscore the seriousness of his point to anyone in the congregation who remains unimpressed, and also a paradoxical attempt to use language to communicate the existence of truths that are beyond language's bounds.

> Men's hearts harden, and their guilt increases apace at such a day as this, if they neglect their souls: and never was there so great danger of such persons being given up to hardness of heart, and blindness of mind. God seems now to be hastily gathering in his elect in all parts of the land; and probably the bigger part of adult persons that ever shall be saved, will be brought in now in a little time.

Related Characters: Jonathan Edwards (speaker), God

Related Themes:

Page Number: 184

Explanation and Analysis

This passage comes at the very end of Edwards' sermon, when he is making a closing argument to the congregation about the necessity of accepting Christ. Here, Edwards' persuasion resembles high-pressure sales tactics, in that he builds urgency by explaining why the audience must act *now*

instead of at some point in the future. Just as God's wrath builds up like waters against a dam, sinners' hearts harden as they continue to sin, diminishing their likelihood of finding Christ in the future. Furthermore, Edwards references the mass conversions of the Great Awakening—the Protestant revival movement of which he was a part—to imply that the present moment is a special spiritual time when God is gathering all his "elect" en masse. Edwards cites the flurry of religious activity in New England as evidence that the end times are approaching and that, therefore, sinners have a limited window for conversion before being cast into hell. While the end times did not come immediately following the Great Awakening, it's easy to see how a divine logic could be read into the increased spirituality of the period. Fittingly, Edwards saw God's power in this, rather than his own; however, it was Edwards' forceful and inspiring rhetoric—not God gathering his elect—that brought many sinners in New England to repent.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PART 1

The sermon opens with two epigraphs from the Old Testament: one from Deuteronomy and one from the Book of Amos. The quotation from Amos emphasizes God's power to see all human action, thwart human plans and behavior, and unleash vengeance upon individuals. The quotation from Deuteronomy—"Their foot shall slide in due time"—is foundational to the sermon that follows.

The opening of a sermon traditionally cites a Biblical passage that the preacher will then use the body of the sermon to interpret. Here, Edwards gives two quotations, both of which ominously imply that mankind is in grave danger of damnation.

Jonathan Edwards begins to explain the Biblical quotation from Deuteronomy that opened the sermon. The quotation is a threat of vengeance from God to the sinful Israelites who, despite God's grace and kindness, were still not faithful. Edwards notes that he will expand on the following four implications of this quotation, all of which relate to the punishment of the Israelites.

Edwards begins his sermon by contextualizing the Bible passages he cited. This establishes for the congregation that damnation is not an abstract threat, but rather a historical reality: according to the Bible, the misbehaving Israelites were subject to God's vengeance.

1. The Israelites were always vulnerable to punishment (or, as Edwards writes, "destruction"), just as any person who walks in a slippery place is vulnerable to a fall. Edwards quotes Psalm 73, which links God having "set them in slippery places" to the Israelites being cast "down into destruction."

Edwards embarks on a close reading of the passage from Deuteronomy, using the notion of a foot slipping to explore the spiritual nuances of sin and damnation.

2. Not only were the Israelites vulnerable to punishment, but they were vulnerable to *unexpected and sudden* punishment at God's whim. A person walking in a slippery place cannot foresee the moment in which he or she will fall—the fall is always sudden and without warning. Edwards quotes Psalm 73 further, which suggests that sinners are "brought into desolation as in a moment."

Edwards argues that a sinner's life is as precarious as a foot on a slippery surface. By underscoring that a slip is always sudden, Edwards seeks to unsettle the congregation and make them realize that the consequences for their sins could arrive at any time without warning.

3. Furthermore, the sudden fall is liable not to be due to any external force. Nobody is pushing the person on a slippery surface; he or she falls only due to his or her own weight.

This point clarifies that the sinner alone is to blame for their damnation, not God or circumstance. This passage also implies Edwards' familiarity with the theory of gravity; indeed, he loved Isaac Newton.

4. In fact, the only reason that sinners haven't yet fallen due to their own weight is that God's hand holds them up until God's appointed time comes. Once that time comes, they will fall suddenly, just as their weight dictates. Edwards clarifies his metaphor: it is less like a person walking on a slippery surface than like a person being held on a slippery slope that descends towards a pit; once that person is no longer held up, he or she has no choice but to "fall into destruction."

It is now no longer clear if Edwards is speaking metaphorically about the person on the slippery surface, about the Israelites, or about the sinners in his congregation. "They" is ambiguous. Furthering the confusion, Edwards changes the terms of his metaphor to emphasize God's power and the danger of hell (the "pit").

The central observation that should be made from the Deuteronomy quote, then, is that: "There is nothing that keeps wicked men, at any one moment, out of hell, but the [mere] pleasure of God." By this, Edwards refers to God's "arbitrary will, restrained by no obligation" and hindered by nothing. The lives and fates of wicked men are, then, literally at the whim of God's all-powerful will, and only at the whim of God's will. Edwards then states that the truth of this observation is apparent in the following statements.

This point was likely already clear from Edwards' preceding interpretation of the "slippery slope" metaphor, but speeches often build in some redundancy of message in order to make sure that the audience understands the central point. Therefore, this passage drives home that the only thing keeping sinners from hell is the arbitrary will of God, just in case some congregants missed the point before.

1. God has the power to cast a wicked person into hell at any moment and nobody, no matter how strong, is able to resist. While a prince on earth may have a difficult time quelling a rebellion, God has no trouble breaking his enemies: there is no defense against God. Edwards compares the powerless enemies of God to "great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind" and "dry stubble before devouring flames," and he notes how easy it is to crush a worm underfoot—it is just as easy for God to send sinners to hell. In light of this, Edwards asks, who are we to think that we can assert our will against God?

Edwards uses numbered lists throughout the sermon in order to make the structure of his thought explicit. The next ten points are implications of Edwards' "central observation" that God's arbitrary will is all that keeps sinners from hell. In this first point, Edwards uses evocative metaphors to underscore the point he has already made about God's power. To get through to his congregants, it seems that Edwards needs to tie an abstract spiritual concept (the power of God) to something more tangible (the wind, a person crushing a worm, a fire).

2. Sinners deserve to be sent to hell: "divine justice," then, is not an adequate objection to God "using his power at any moment to destroy them." On the contrary, justice would be for a sinner to be punished immediately. The sword of justice is always hanging over the heads of sinners—it is only the "arbitrary mercy" of God's will that holds it back.

Edwards is responding to what he sees as a common misreading of the Bible. This is an established rhetorical tactic: strengthening an argument by anticipating and responding to the audience's objections. Here, he reframes "justice" by reminding the audience that they are unworthy of salvation, and therefore "justice" would actually mean damnation.

3. It's worth noting that sinners' condemnation to hell is based fundamentally on their lack of proper faith—their bad deeds exist in *addition* to this. Edwards quotes the Gospel of John to demonstrate that those who do not believe are not only condemned to hell, but also originally come from hell. Thus, in every way, hell is a sinner's proper place.

This passage is slightly confusing. By saying that sinners originally come from hell, Edwards seems to imply that the difference between non-sinners and sinners is not simply their belief in Christ, but also their literal place of origin. It's helpful not to read too much into this—Edwards seems to be making a dramatic point about the extent to which sinners belong in hell, rather than explaining human nature or theology in a nuanced way.

4. It would be a mistake to think that living sinners are not currently in hell because God is less angry with them than he is with those already in hell—God's fury at sinners on earth is equal to, or even greater than, his fury at those in hell. Edwards states that God is doubtless angrier with some people in this very congregation (though those people likely have a false sense of safety) than he is with "those that are now in the flames of hell." God notices everyone's wickedness, and the pit of hell is hot and ready to receive all sinners at any time.

Once again, Edwards anticipates a possible objection to his sermon and forcefully refutes it. He also, for the first time, directly implicates the congregation by telling them that there are people in this room who are bound for hell. This is another sly rhetorical move. Those who might be unconvinced by Edwards' speech are called out directly and told that their sense of safety does not mean that the sermon doesn't apply to them; in fact, it might mean that they need the sermon most. Clearly, Edwards is committed to reaching every single congregant.

5. The Devil is also ready to receive sinners at whichever moment God decides—after all, sinners belong to the Devil, and their souls are already in his possession. Devils watch sinners "like greedy hungry lions" at all times; the Devils are restrained from their prey only by God's will.

Edwards makes another comment seeming to impugn the nature (rather than the behavior or beliefs) of sinners. He once again anchors an abstract spiritual concept (the lurking Devil) to a concrete metaphor from earth (lions).

6. In fact, in the souls of wicked men lie the very elements of hell itself. Were it not for God's will, their souls would flame "into hell fire." Thus, in the "nature of carnal men" there is inherently "a foundation for the torments of hell." The only thing keeping the wicked from unrestrained sin and torment is God, who restrains their wickedness on earth. If God did not do this, then sin "would immediately turn the soul into a fiery oven, or a furnace of fire and brimstone."

This is Edwards' strongest implication that mankind is evil by nature. It's important to note that, while Edwards does believe that all people are born with a propensity towards evil, this is not because he believes that the human species is naturally evil; rather, it is because all people are tainted by original sin. Essentially, Edwards is making a distinction between the general nature of mankind (which is good), and the specific evil nature with which everyone is born because of original sin.

7. There is no safety for wicked men, even if death does not seem immediately at hand. Regardless of health or caution, man is always on the brink of death by "innumerable and inconceivable" means. Edwards says that sinners walk on a rotted floor over the pit of hell, and the floor could give at any moment. There are so many ways for a sinner to die that God doesn't even need to create a miracle—he could kill them in the ordinary course of their day and it would be completely normal.

This is another example of Edwards anticipating an audience objection to his sermon. The congregation to which he preached this sermon had become notoriously comfortable with their lives on Earth—they were enjoying new health and prosperity brought about by various technological improvements—and Edwards feared that they had become too confident in their own ability to control their lives. Therefore, he emphasizes that their lives are not as stable as they may seem.

8. It's pointless to try to preserve your own life, Edwards says, and wisdom won't help you, either. After all, wise men don't meet untimely deaths any less often than the unwise.

Edwards is systematically tearing down every logical objection to the necessity of having faith in Christ in order to obtain salvation.

9. Any effort to escape hell while still rejecting Christ is worthless. However, almost all people who hear of hell delude themselves into thinking that they are good enough to escape damnation. Though everyone knows that the majority of people go to hell, people tend to think of themselves as having uniquely good plans for their own salvation. However, this is overconfidence. Those who are currently in hell had the same delusions while on earth: none of them expected their own damnation, and they now regret their vanity and foolishness.

Edwards has made a version of this point once before, but he returns to it because reminding the congregation of their sin and unsettling the most confident among them is essential to making them receptive to the remainder of his sermon. If the congregation does not truly believe that they are in tremendous danger, then they have little incentive to take Edwards seriously.

10. God has no obligation to keep man out of hell. It is Christ that offered the covenant of grace, but those without interest in Christ should not expect to benefit from Christ's promises. In this way, it would be foolish for a person to think that earnest religious activity without a fundamental belief in Christ could ever lead to salvation. All people, then, are being held over the pit of hell by a furious God who has no obligation not to send them to eternal torture. Hell and the Devil are hungry for them, and the fire in their own hearts is struggling to ignite—except for Christ ("the Mediator"), everything is conspiring to send sinners to hell. Without Christ, nobody has a refuge from the arbitrary will of an angry god.

Here, Edwards clarifies what he sees to be the relationship between people, God, and Christ. God himself has no compassion or mercy—it is Christ alone who can help mankind. The final passage of this section of the sermon gives an overview of the dire human condition as Edwards sees it, laying out a strong case for why mankind is in profound danger and why coming to Christ is essential.

PART 2. APPLICATION

For every person in the congregation that is "unconverted" (not with Christ), "there is nothing between you and Hell" except the hand of God. Wickedness makes these people "heavy as lead," and no amount of health, practicality, or righteousness can save them from hell.

The first section of Edwards' sermon was a close reading of a Biblical text, focused on explaining the text's implications. This section—the "application"—instructs the congregation on how to apply that reading to their own lives.

Edwards tells the congregation that if they are sinners then they are a burden to the earth. God's creatures are meant to serve God, and the sun doesn't shine willingly on sinners, nor does the earth "willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts," nor does the air willingly give breath to sinners. Thus, the earth "would spew you out" if not for the hand of God.

While Edwards has previously scared the congregation by emphasizing the evil nature of mankind, he now implies that mankind is actually naturally good and that their wickedness is so anathema to the natural order of things that the earth would, without God's intervention, spit sinners out. Edwards' rhetoric is still scary here, but this is a subtle shift to a more positive vision of mankind.

The wrath of God is like dammed water: the longer it is pent up, the greater its force once it is released. Thus sinners, whose guilt is "constantly increasing," are "every day treasuring up more wrath." Were God to release the floodgates, sinners could do nothing to withstand or endure it.

Once again, Edwards turns to an easily understood metaphor in order to make concrete the power of God's wrath. Like Edwards' evocation of the theory of gravity with the "slippery slope" metaphor, this metaphor demonstrates Edwards' interest in physics.

This is the state of everyone who has not "passed under a great change of heart" and been "born again." This rebirth is a strict requirement: despite reforms in other aspects of life or earnest (but improper) religious conviction, a person is "in the hands of an angry God" until they are awakened to Christ. Whether or not the audience is convinced of this, Edwards tells them that they will know the truth someday, just as those who are in hell now understand their errors on earth.

Edwards has referenced Christ several times before this, but this is the first sustained explanation of the stark choice facing sinners: hell, or being born again into Christ. Edwards has tried to stack the deck rhetorically with his horrible metaphors of hell so that the stakes of the choice are even clearer and so that nobody feels safe brushing him off.

God holds sinners over the pit of hell just as one would hold a spider over a fire, and God hates sinners just as much as one might loathe an insect. "You are ten thousand times so abominable in his eyes as the most hateful venomous serpent is in ours." The congregation has offended God unimaginably, and yet it is only God's will that keeps them from hell. Edwards reminds the congregation that God is the reason they woke up on earth instead of in hell this morning, and God is the only reason that they haven't been sent to hell while hypocritically worshiping in church today.

This is perhaps the most famous passage from the sermon because Edwards' metaphors are so threatening and powerful. Throughout the sermon, Edwards has compared sinners to vermin (spiders, worms, etc.), and here he drives that imagery home. Sinners are truly precarious if God regards them as people regard vermin—most people don't think twice before killing a spider.

Edwards urges the congregation to consider what danger they are in: they "hang by a slender thread" over flames ready to singe and break that thread, and they have no recourse since they have not given themselves to Christ. He asks the congregation to consider the following things concerning the danger of God's wrath.

Edwards gives the congregation yet another evocative metaphor, and then embarks on another numbered list to order his thoughts about God's wrath. Again, this is a way to make sure the congregation is following the structure of the sermon.

1. The wrath that threatens them is not the wrath of man, but the wrath of the "infinite God." This wrath is immeasurably greater than the wrath of kings, whom people tend to deeply fear. While a king can inflict horrible torture on a subject who has angered him, all of the most powerful men on earth are "but feeble despicable worms in the dust" in comparison with God. God's wrath is thus tremendously more terrible than the wrath of even the most powerful men.

In trying to make the congregation grasp the power and wrath of God, Edwards says that God is exponentially more powerful than the most powerful person they can imagine, which was a king (in 1741, the United States did not yet exist, and Connecticut was a colony of Britain, ruled by King George III).

2. The wrath of God is itself frightening, but it is the fierceness and fury of that wrath that must be noted. Edwards quotes several Biblical passages that describe this fury, and then remarks, "Who can utter or conceive what such expressions carry in them!" But God's wrath, Edwards notes, isn't just an expression—it is real, and whomever is subject to it will be sunk into an "inexpressible, inconceivable depth of misery."

This is a subtler example of Edwards attempting to anticipate and respond to the congregation's objections. Even though Edwards has used horrifying metaphors throughout the sermon, he points out that language and imagery pale before the true fury of God—just in case anyone was thus far unmoved.

The fierceness of God's wrath implies that it will be inflicted without pity: God will not have compassion for suffering, nor will he show mercy or restraint, except that nobody shall suffer "beyond what strict justice requires." However, even punishment within these limits is unbearable, and suffering will not be withheld simply because the punishment is so terrible.

Here, Edwards addresses another misconception: just because God is just does not mean he must be merciful. However, for the first time, Edwards nods to the limits of God's punishment by saying that God won't torture sinners unjustly. He doesn't explore this point further, though, because it's contrary to his goal of terrifying the congregation.

Edwards notes that God is ready to pity the congregation, as today "is a day of mercy." Once this day of mercy is past, though, no amount of crying can change their fate. If sinners let this opportunity pass, then God will consider them to be vessels with no use but "to be filled full of wrath." If the sinners cry, God will not pity them, but will "laugh and mock."

This is a slightly imprecise statement, since in Edwards' theology, it's Christ—not God (the Father)—who will save the sinners. Edwards gives no other indication that God would show pity, so this statement should be taken loosely.

"How awful are these words," Edwards says of "the words of the Great God," quoting a passage from the Book of Isaiah in which God promises to tread on sinners in anger until their blood stains his clothes. Edwards says that it's impossible to think of a statement with more "contempt, hatred, and fierceness of indignation." This shows that God won't pity sinners, even if they cry: instead, he will express his hatred through violence, and their rightful place will be under his foot.

This is one of the only moments in the sermon in which one of Edwards' Biblical quotations seem to match the intensity and violence of Edwards' own metaphors. The image of God trampling sinners until his clothes are soaked with blood is startling, and it signals to the congregation that Edwards' rhetoric isn't excessive: it's backed by the Bible.

3. Sometimes, just like kings desire to demonstrate the force of their wrath, God wants to show people how good his love is and how terrible is his wrath. Thus, the sinners in the congregation might expect to be made an example of: in a state of "suffering the infinite weight and power of his indignation," the sinner could be observed by "the whole universe," including the angels and the inhabitants of heaven, who will see this spectacle as even more reason to worship the "power and majesty" of God.

If the magnitude of suffering in hell wasn't enough, Edwards now tells the congregation that they can also expect to be humiliated before the whole universe if they don't come to Christ. This shows that Edwards imagines God not only as full of wrath, but also as vindictive and even cruel. To make matters worse, this humiliation would only be to aggrandize God himself, so it seems like Edwards' God is also quite petty.

4. This wrath is everlasting. Though experiencing even one moment of it would be horrible, the wrath endures for all eternity. A sinner in hell looks to their future of "merciless vengeance" in despair, as, no matter how long they spend being tortured, they have no respite to look forward to. The "state of a soul in such circumstances" is "inexpressible and inconceivable"—everything said about it on earth is only a "faint representation" of the power of God's anger.

Throughout the sermon, Edwards has been asking the congregation to viscerally imagine their terrible future in hell. Now, he goes one step further, asking them to imagine that they're in hell and looking to their future of eternal torture. This compounds the congregation's hopelessness. Finally, Edwards reminds them once again that the true suffering they will face is so awful that it cannot be communicated in words.

It's a terrible state to be in danger of experiencing such wrath, and every person in the congregation who has not been born again is in exactly this danger, regardless of how moral and religious they think they are. In fact, Edwards claims, there is "reason to think" that many in the congregation will, indeed, go to hell, and those people may well have listened to this sermon without any disturbance, thinking that they were not implicated. Further, it's likely that some people in the congregation might be in hell before this year is over—someone could even go before tomorrow morning. Those who won't go to hell for a long time shouldn't be comforted either, since, in the scope of eternity, they will still be in hell shortly.

This section of the sermon is meant as a final attempt to unsettle those in the congregation who might still be unmoved. By noting that those who will go to hell might listen to the sermon undisturbed, Edwards specifically addresses skeptical congregants, trying to bring them into the fold by framing their reaction to the sermon as evidence that they might go to hell. Here, Edwards is trying to systematically demolish every sense of security a person might have, including the idea that their life on earth could be long.

While those already in hell cannot change their circumstances, the congregation has been given a remarkable opportunity to be saved, one that those in hell would envy. By coming to Christ for mercy, the congregation can join the saved in a "happy state, with their hearts filled" and their sins washed in the blood of Christ. How awful it would be to be left behind while others are rejoicing, or to be tortured while others sing, Edwards reminds the congregation.

After spending so long describing the abject horror of hell, Edwards turns to Christ to offer an alternative vision. Notably, Edwards focuses much more rhetorical energy on evoking the fear of hell than he does on enticing the congregation to salvation with imagery of paradise. His language in describing heaven is vague and even somewhat stale.

Edwards begs those who are not yet born again to consider how much of God's wrath they have accumulated and how horrible it would be to be passed over for salvation. He urges them to "wake thoroughly out of sleep," for they cannot bear the full extent of God's wrath. Edwards addresses young people, in particular, urging them to renounce "youthful vanities" lest they become children of the Devil while so many other good children are happy children of God.

Even though this is the closing argument of the sermon—the moment in which Edwards seems to have turned to enticing the congregation to Christ—he still returns to frightening imagery of God's wrath. Perhaps Edwards dwells on this because he believes that fear of hell is more compelling to the congregation than desire for heaven.

Emphasizing the importance of this opportunity to come to Christ, Edwards suggests that denying Christ today will result in a hardening of the heart that will make finding Christ more difficult later on. Thus, this day is one of both great promise and great danger. Edwards notes that God seems to be "hastily gathering" his people on earth, and that, as such, it's likely that most people who will be saved will be saved within a short span of time. Sinners who fail to heed this warning will curse this day and curse the day they were born once they arrive in hell having witnessed and ignored this "season of the pouring out of God's spirit." One last time, Edwards implores the congregation to "now awake and fly from the wrath of God…lest you be consumed."

Edwards closes his sermon with a passage that resembles high-pressure sales tactics. In order to make sure that the congregation converts to Christ before it's too late, Edwards emphasizes the urgency of their predicament: if they delay coming to Christ, then they might miss the opportunity altogether. This is equivalent to a flashing sign that says, "sale ends today," although, of course, the stakes that Edwards has presented are much higher. Predictably, instead of ending on an inspiring note, Edwards closes with a threat.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

McNamara, Sylvie. "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 28 Sep 2017. Web. 18 Oct 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

McNamara, Sylvie. "*Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.*" LitCharts LLC, September 28, 2017. Retrieved October 18, 2019. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/sinners-in-the-hands-of-an-angry-god.

To cite any of the quotes from *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Edwards, Jonathan. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Dover Publications. 2013.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Edwards, Jonathan. Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 2013.